

Prayer as a Panacea for Human Problems: Nigerian Christian Experience.

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Abstract

Nigeria is one of the most populated countries of the world. She is endowed with rich natural and human resources. Yet Nigeria is regarded as one of the poorest nations of the world as the leadership is corrupt and selfish. Institutionalized corruption therefore is at the root of the social, political and economic problems of Nigeria, and has in essence, impoverished the greater majority of the Nigerian people. This poverty has found a profound expression in religion and religious activities among the masses who recourse to faith in God and fervent prayers as the only solution to their sufferings. Christian religious sects as a consequence, over the last two decades, have blossomed in Nigeria. In cities as well as the suburbs, prayer sessions and overnight vigils and crusades for prosperity, faith and spiritual healings, and supplication against bribery and corruption are held by real and fake men of God. This paper therefore examined the concept of prayer and its utility value in solving problems in Nigerian society.

Introduction:

Prayer is an essential element of every religion. It is a means of having conversation with the Supreme Being. In Nigeria, three main religions are practised; namely, African traditional, Christian and Islamic religions. Nigeria is a heterogeneous society, blessed, with abundant human and natural resources but is seriously marred by corruption. Corruption, generally, as Eze (2003) noted is “a term used to qualify the prevailing social ills that affect the entire facet of our society” (p.3). Corruption is a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the fabric of the Nigerian society. According to Umez (2000) “if there is any one factor that could be blamed for the unprecedented economic, social and political decline in Nigeria, it will be corruption” (p.23). In consonance with this statement, Amujiri (2002) also stated that:

Corruption has weakened the efficiency of government in Nigeria; increased opportunities for organized crimes; eroded confidence in the justice of the political order; discouraged the habit of hard work, dedication, honesty and discipline; adds to tax payer’s burden; rendered patriotism nearly impossible and made nonsense of public accountability (p.68).

Commenting on this, Omeregbe (1993) stated that “Nigeria is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, a country permeated with corruption in every sector, from government circles, government institutions and parastatals to the private sector” (p.xi). Supporting this view, it was noted that the 2001 report of the Transparency International (TI) using the corruption perception index (CPI) ranked Nigeria as the second most corrupt country in the world after Bangladesh (Sunday Punch as cited in Ukwuaba (2002). This has been attributed to bad leadership.

Similarly, Achebe (1983) stated that “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the problem of endemic corruption and failure of leaders to rise to the responsibility and the challenge of leadership and personal example” (p.1). A strong contributing factor to this institutionalized corruption is the fact that values have been skewed up in Nigeria, especially since after the civil war and as a result of long military rule. Thus, materialism, which found expression in shameless dishonesty, selfishness, greed, bribery, unbridled looting of public treasury, fraud, moral decadence, insecurity of lives and property, and so on; became the other of the day. Her economy is in shambles. Consequently, the few enriched by corruption continue

to be richer while the impoverished majority continues to be poorer. The Nigerian nation thus became a nation in trouble with avoidable but unprecedented suffering for her citizens. There is no doubt that wrong value system and moral decadence are at the root of Nigeria's socio-economic problems. As Omeregbe (1993): pointed out:

An immoral society is also a sick society. By an immoral society we mean a society permeated with corruption, dishonesty, fraud, selfishness, embezzlement of public funds and other immoral acts. Such a society is sick and cannot be in sound order. Its organs cannot function properly because they are not in sound healthy conditions. Life in such a society is increasingly difficult, insecure and unhappy. Something has to be done (p.x).

The socio-economic decay with the attendant mass sufferings in Nigeria presents a veritable thriving ground for religion as a means of survival and a general panacea to the mass sufferings, for as in classic Karl Max, "religion is the opium of the people." (Haralambos and Heald, 1980).

However, as has been entrenched in the psyche of the nation, corruption and evil found vein even in religion. Churches and various religious sects mushroomed and "men of God" became "men of mammon." Instead of preaching piety, moral rectitude, temperance and value, prayers and sermons were centred on earthly riches and affluence. The poor became even poorer on account of being 'robbed' by bogus men and women of God. Even the sick and troubled are not spared as they are tricked into parting with their possessions by 'fake and arranged miraculous healings'. The nation's sickness is thus compounded. But what is prayer? Can prayer actually help in healing a nation and especially, a nation such as Nigeria? To salvage this country from moral decay and corruption through sincere prayer and ethical re-orientation form the main thrust of this paper and it is the view of these researchers that only sincere prayer and ethical re-orientation can salvage Nigeria from her social, political, economic, and moral dilemma.

Conceptual clarification

Prayer: Prayer is one of the acts of virtues of religion. According to Ifesieh (1989), "prayer is the most practical demonstration of man's relation with his source of existence" (p.100). Ekwunife (2007) asserts that prayer "is spiritual means through which the religious man interiorly and externally communicates with God and all supra-sensible beings of His invisible world" (p.6). In *Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia* prayer is defined as the "act of attempting to communicate with a deity or spirit for the purpose of worshipping, requesting guidance, requesting assistance, confessing sins, as an act of reparation or to express ones thoughts and emotions". It went further to state that the act of prayer may take the form of intercession, a hymn, incantation or a spontaneous utterance in the person's praying words. "By prayer we acknowledge God's power and goodness, our own neediness and dependence" (*Catholic Encyclopedia*). Prayer therefore is an act of virtue of religion which implies our reverence and dependence on God. It is a means of communicating with the Ultimate Reality.

Prayer can either be mental or vocal, private or public. "Prayer may be done privately and individually, or it may be done corporately in the presence of fellow believers" (*Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia*). Prayer could also be classified in terms of purpose or intention. Under this we have prayers of petition, intercession, thanksgiving, praise, adoration, meditation, contemplation, repentance, contrition, confession, atonement, blessing, cursing, lament and so on (Ekwunife 2007). Prayer, no matter the form it takes, relates man to his source of being.

Functions of Prayer:

Prayer is a common phenomenon in every religion. Gbenda (2006) stated that: "Prayer is based on the conviction of the Supplicant that there exists the transcendent or unmoved mover who is capable of influencing all the departments of life and who has a relationship with man" (p.65). In prayer we have communion with God. It is a means of reaching the supernatural world. Cordova (2006) identified four functions of prayer, which are: (i) prayer as awareness of the divine, (ii) prayer as praise, (iii) prayer as self reflection and (iv) prayer as self-projection. The functions of prayer could also be deduced from the acronym ACTS; which stands for adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. To these we turn.

Adoration: This means man's acknowledgement of God's majesty and our entire dependence on him (Ifesieh 1989). This is a prayer to appreciate God and his good works in the life of man. The *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* defined adoration as "intense admiration, culminating in reverence and worship, together with the outward acts and attitudes which accompany such reverence". Adoration involves the act of worship, showing profound regard and reverence to God. It entails devotion and veneration to God. Through prayer man glorifies God. It elevates our minds to God.

Confession: This has to do with man's reflection on his actions towards God and his fellow human beings. Prayer enables one to confess his sins to God. Confession involves declaring our sins to God and asking for forgiveness. It enables us acknowledge our sins and therefore humbles us to ask for forgiveness from the Supreme Being. Sin separates one from God. The act of confessing one's sins and asking for forgiveness is a sign of a healthy personal relationship with God.

Thanksgiving: This is a prayer of appreciation and it enables us appreciate God for his mercies unto us. It is a heart-felt gratitude to God in appreciation of his favours and it is all about thanking him for his blessings to us. It is a prayer offered to God in recognition of his love for and protection over us.

Supplication: This means to ask for humbly and earnestly by prayer. In other words, to make a humble earnest petition, beg (*The Free Online Dictionary*). Supplication is a humble request from God; a prayer asking for his help in our lives. Supplication "includes petition for our needs and intercession for others" (Koenig 2006). It enables us to understand, that as human beings, we are totally dependent on God for our needs.

From the foregoing, one can say that prayer enables one to communicate with the Supernatural Being, as well as giving him thanks and praises; and, in faith and humility, solicit for his forgiveness of one's sins, protection and provision in life. In prayer man attracts the attention of the Supernatural and prayer thus, makes us grow spiritually and strengthens our faith in God.

Is prayer a panacea to Nigeria's contemporary problems?

Corruption is a global phenomenon. It is found in every society but the magnitude of corruption differs from one nation to the other. The Nigerian society is bedevilled with corruption. Corruption has been identified as a very big problem retarding the socio-economic growth and entire development of the country. Many scholars have reflected on the issue of corruption in Nigeria and have identified corruption in its different forms and ramifications. In trying to check corruption, various bogus anti-corruption programs were set up by certain Nigerian governments, which ironically included many of the governments manned by military dictators who ceased power by the barrels of the gun. These included the War Against Indiscipline (WAI), Mass

Mobilization for Social and Economic Recovery (M.A.M.S.E.R), the Code of Conduct Bureau, Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (I.C.P.C.), Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (E.F.C.C.) and so on, but so far they all seem to have failed to cure Nigeria of her malady.

In addition, the major religions and denominations at various times in the past instituted various prayers to heal and save the nation, including, Nigeria Prays (non-denominational), Prayer for Nigeria in trouble (non-denominational) and Prayer against corruption in Nigeria (the Catholic church) to name but a few, but the problem remains persistent and rather worsens as evidenced in the activities of the 2003 and 2007 general elections in the country. Consequently, the million dollar question worth reflecting on is: Can prayer alone be a solution to Nigerian's contemporary problems? Sincere prayer is a necessity in the lives of every religious man. It is really relevant in the Nigerian situation. Nigeria notably is a country with large populations of Christians, Muslims and African traditional practitioners. In each of these religions, prayer is an essential feature of the mode of group worship and as well an essential feature in the everyday lives of all or most of the practitioners in the nation. For example, Christians are not only asked to pray but they are enjoined to pray constantly (Luke 18:1f). In Islamic religion prayer is one of the five pillars of Islam. A Muslim is required to pray at least five times a day at stated hours between dawn and the sunrise, after midday, about 4.00pm in the afternoon, after sunset and sometimes during the night (Ekwunife 2007). African traditional practitioners also pray to God through their ancestors and divinities.

Prayer requires faith in God. It presupposes faith and hope in God for his goodness. In Mark

11:22-24, Jesus says:

Have faith in God. Truly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, be taken up and cast into the sea and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will come to pass; it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.

To overcome any problem one needs to have faith and trust in God. In Matt 11: 28-29, Jesus said "come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest". Prayer was part of the ministry of Jesus Christ and he taught his disciples how to pray (Matt 6:9-13, Luke 11:1-3). The early Christians continued with the doctrine of prayer (Rom. 12:12; Col 4:2). Christ prayed at critical moments of his life: at his baptism when his public ministry started (Luke 3:21); at the choosing of the twelve (Luke 6:12); at his transfiguration which follows momentous challenge and response at Caesarea Philippi (Luke 9:28); and at his agony in the Garden (Luke 13:39-45; Hebrew 5:7) (Martin 1974). Although prayer was very vital in the life of Christ, he did not only pray, he went about doing good, helping the rich and the poor, the young and the old. Thus, Christ although the son of God worshipped God truly and sincerely by his works and love for everyone, including his enemies. He asked his followers to do the same.

Faith and good work are therefore essentially concomitant to prayer as a mode of worship of God and can result in the healing of a nation. Thus faith without good works is dead (James 2:14-26). Christ also made it clear in John 4:24 that "God is spirit; and those who worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth". The fruit of the spirit is love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control. (Galatians 5: 22-25). In James 5:16 it was also stated thus: "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effect". Therefore, this could mean that the prayer of unrighteous man is counterproductive. Sincerity is needed in prayer. This is contrary to what is happening in Nigeria where many prayer houses are opened for

commercial purposes. Churches are being opened in all nooks and crannies of the nation, several of which are demonic and evil in practice and their leaders immoral, corrupt and driven by materialism. Thus, the Christian religious worship is no more being practised in its true form: truthfully and spiritually. As noted by the Catholic Bishop of Uyo in Obiora (1999).

False teachers breed in such hibernations (churches). They abound everywhere. Self made pastors, bishops, archbishops and various hierarchies of prelates are today found in many communities. Seers, visioners, healers, are as present among us as the air we breathe. Churches, prayer houses and fellowship rooms are found in virtually every classroom, mechanic workshops etc, in taxicabs, buses, trains, Lorries ...false gospel sold. Signposts and roofs of living homes and genuine companies hardly outnumber registered but fake churches whose proprietors brew nothing but poisonous doctrines with which to enslave the unwary whom they profess and claim ... to liberate and save (p.xiii).

This is in contrast to the injunction in John 4: 24 and James 2: 14-26. Hence, human effort in terms of putting faith and good work to action is needed in solving the problem of Nigeria. No matter how Nigerians pray without a change of heart (in other words, self or internal reformation) the problem will persist and continue to multiply. Both the leaders and the led (the citizens) need transformation. Nigerians need moral re-generation. It is only through prayer and ethical re-orientation that Nigeria's problem could be solved. Nigerians need change of attitude. We need to re-examine our relationship with God and also to de-emphasize materialism. We need to be guided by moral principles and right values. Nigeria cannot be good if her citizens are not good. We need to emphasize values of honesty, love, peace, justice, trust, impartiality, accountability, kindness, respect for human right, transparency, discipline and so on.

Given that prayer cannot workout without the aforementioned concomitant factors, it will be germane to mention that prayer can still make waves in providing lasting solutions to human problems in the society.

Firstly, it affords one the impetus to work with fear or trepidation. Faith cannot be feasible without constant prayer. Therefore Nigerians are to be enjoined like Christ told his disciples to pray ceaselessly as they work.

In prayer we have conversation with God. A lack of conversation is a sign of relationship in trouble. True, honest, heartfelt conversation is a sign of a healthy relationship (Goettsch 1998). This healthy relationship with God is what we enjoy when we converse with him. During conversation we tell him our needs and thank him for his blessings. So prayer brings us close to God and being close to him will make us do his will.

We pray because we are in fierce battle with the devil (Eph.6:10). Prayer equips us to face the challenges of live. In prayer we solicit God's help. When we neglect prayer we will be like one fighting a battle unarmed. We are unable to resist temptations. The urge to embezzle public fund and other vices will be reduced to the barest minimum if we pray constantly.

Recommendations

Having identified true and sincere prayer as well as ethical re-orientation as solutions to Nigeria's socio-economic and political problems, it is only necessary to make some recommendations.

The family is the bed-rock of the society. It is the first socializing point for the child. Therefore parents should inculcate in their child/children right values that will make them grow into responsible adults. Such values include hard work and the dignity of labour, honesty, justice, kindness, obedience, truthfulness, peace, love, humility, and so on while they should shun vices such as stealing, dishonesty, fraud,

violence, greed, intolerance, and so on. Parents should also try to be worthy role models by setting good examples for their children. As Umez (2000) pointed out “when parents tell the truth and are open to their children, they will become models of honesty to their children” (p.90). They should teach their children how to begin each day with God through earnest prayer. Parents should inculcate this virtue of constant and regular prayers into their children to ensure fruitful results in their daily living. It helps one to begin the day with prayers but very lovely to sustain such a gusto.

Moral instruction should be emphasized in schools both in primary and secondary schools. This will help in inculcating discipline in the children. Although moral instruction is part of the secondary school curriculum, it is often not taken seriously in many schools. Themes based on efficacy of prayer, good leadership, discipline, love of God and love of one’s neighbour, and so on should be thought in schools. Moral principles learnt from these lessons will also help in inculcating the right attitude and values such as respect for people, truthfulness, tolerance and so on in the children.

In the wider society our leaders should be accountable to her citizens. Looters should be punished appropriately and nobody should be above the law. Public office should be seen as a service source for common good and not as a means for quick and fraudulent self- enrichment. The various anti-corruption agencies established by the government should be given strong legislative and legal backing and, in addition, equipped with all other necessary operative logistics to enable them carry out their duties effectively and without executive interference. Our leaders should adjust to starting off office activities with prayers as this will help take their minds away from looting of public treasury and other fraudulent acts.

The church should put to practice what they preach. Our church leaders should de-emphasize materialism. In some churches there are prayers mapped out against corruption in the society but things have not changed. This could be because we have not prayed with sincere hearts. Christians should augment their prayer with good work which entails service to humanity. They should emphasize more on the fruit of the spirit. They should use several avenues like the media to conscientise the nation. The church should be in the forefront in the campaign against corruption and should organize seminars, conferences, and workshops for the youths to acquaint them with the negative effect of corruption and the importance of matching prayer with good work.

Conclusion

It is crystal clear that Nigeria has numerous challenges. This is manifest in the magnitude of corruption which has attracted both National and International attention. This is because it has affected the economy of the Nation. It has retarded national growth and development. The masses are suffering. There is youth unemployment and so on. From the study it is discovered that every Nigerian should be involved in solving our problem by developing the right attitude to life. We need to imbibe godly values. It is only through earnest prayer and re-orientation that our problem could be solved. Until Nigerians change, the nation will not change. We have to lay down selfishness and apathy and pick up altruism and commitment.

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